

Linda E. Mitchell. *Portraits of Medieval Women: Family, Marriage, and Politics in England, 1225-1350*. Palgrave, 2003. pp. 185.

Part of the difficulty of studying the history of medieval women is the lack of sources that deal first-hand with their lives. Although much is known about opinions and constraints on women, it is much harder to flesh out their varied experiences. Even aristocratic women left far fewer records than their male counterparts. Chronicle descriptions, which do narrate the activities of the "rich and famous," often veil their descriptions of women behind stereotypes, political propaganda, and unreliable gossip. Combining the tools of prosopography and the perhaps less familiar ethnomethodology, Linda Mitchell has sought to overcome these obstacles and recover the choices and actions of a group of baronial women living in and around the Welsh Marches in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Britain. Ethnomethodology, Mitchell explains, "posits that human interactions within a social and

cultural context are mediated by internally accepted norms that define the way social interchanges are ordered" (3). While prosopography traces individuals through a series of records in order to create "mini-biographies" for comparative purposes, ethnomethodology provides the theoretical background to make sense of the different choices this group of women made. Underlying this methodology is Mitchell's stated assumption that human nature and human emotions have not changed in the last seven hundred years, although their cultural meaning and context for them has certainly changed.

The core of Mitchell's book contains seven chapters, each of which focuses on a different woman and a particular legal issue. The studies are not so much biographies as case studies on how law, politics, and gender combined in the lives these baronial women. To make sense of the actions

of these women, it is thus necessary to understand something of the legal status of women in medieval Britain. English Common Law allowed marriage contracts to include arrangements for a woman's widowhood. At the death of a husband, his widow received particular lands held in dower or her *maritagium*, property settled on her as part of the original marriage contract. As a widow, she then had legal rights unavailable to married women; she could litigate in court, alienate land, and write a will. As a result, widows appear in the legal records more often than married women. Mitchell's case studies are then weighted towards widows. Mitchell is very careful to explain the legal contexts for the actions of the women in question. Also important for understanding these women are the politics of this volatile area and time period. Many of these women had connections to the royal family and thus, dynastic politics also impacted these women. Mitchell, however, tends to assume that her readers have greater familiarity with the political situation than the legal circumstances.

The first study looks at the cooperation and competition among the seven daughters of Sybl de Marshal and William de Ferrers. By tracing the relationship between marriages, land transfers, and lawsuits, Mitchell is able to show the different ways that these sisters used their inheritances and the power that came with it. The second study assesses the relationship between mother and daughter Margaret de Quency and Maud de Lacy, countering the tendency of focusing on father-son relationships when looking at intergenerational influences. Mitchell shows that the relationship between a mother and daughter could also have long-term consequences for a family. Maud de Mortimer of Wigmore's role in the royalist cause during the troubled years of Henry III's reign is the third case study. Her position in the Welsh Marches made her an important ally and Mitchell suggests that her continued prosperity was possibly due to her role as a spy or go-between. The fourth study looks at the differences between English Common Law and Welsh law



in women's inheritance through the experiences of the Lestrange family in Powys. Welsh law made virtually no provisions for women, while English Common Law allowed them to inherit, and made extensive provisions for widows. The movement of land from one legal system to another had a profound impact on English control of Wales, which, Mitchell argues, cannot be fully understood without considering the role of women. The fifth woman, Maud Mortimer of Richard's Castle, was implicated in the murder of her husband and another man. This case illustrates not only the ways in which the Crown could manipulate the law, but also that private and local issues had national consequences. The sixth woman, Isabella de Vescy, was one of the notorious foreign relatives of Eleanor of Castile, Edward I's Spanish queen. Despite her outsider status, Isabella did very well for herself, even becoming a castle warden. Through her, Mitchell shows the ways a woman could gain and maintain real political power. The final case of Alice de Lacy, highlights the vulnerability of women, even

well placed ones. She was raped twice and, despite her closeness to Edward III, forced to marry her second attacker. Mitchell concludes with a summery chapter about the role of gender in understanding these women's behavior. She speculates about the relationship between widowhood and notions of femininity, suggesting that we can also think about widowhood as a separate gender. The legal rights available to widows put them far outside norms of feminine behavior. She also shows that historical characterizations of kings as "good" and "bad" is not a predictor of how well women will do. Henry III is not generally thought to be an effective king, but he actively patronized widows, and made use of women's skills in trying to consolidate his power.

Mitchell's book offers valuable insight into the experiences of aristocratic women. Her careful development of the legal and geographic context of their actions makes further sense of what little we do actually know, and her willingness to speculate on motivations, personal

concerns, and individual interests makes these women's actions appear far more than the sum total of their legal status. Because of the importance of the geographical and political context, it would have been helpful to have maps and more genealogies. The women in this study came from the same general region of Britain, but their concerns spread farther. Many of the women were also connected at least collaterally to the Marshall family, and family trees would have been helpful in following the descriptions of family genealogy. Despite these minor quibbles, this is an important contribution to the history of aristocratic women.

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"You could never find the reciprocated love you look for in a woman. No woman ever loved her husband, nor can she ever bind herself to a lover with a reciprocal bond of love. For it is the woman's way to look for wealth in love, and not to grant to her partner the consolations he likes; and one should not be surprised at this for it is in her nature."

□ Andreas Cappellanus.